**A Single Decision (Take Two)**

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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## Chapter 28

"Was that it?" asked Esera. Murshida slowly stood up, and nodded.

"The exorcism is complete," he announced.

"So who's going to clean up the candles?" asked Voyan, gesturing at the ring of candles that circled *Scimitar.*

"You are," said Esera.

"Who else?" He trudged away, muttering to himself as he extinguished and collected each candle the Skakoan had placed around the ship. Esera wasn't clear on why the candles were needed, or why they'd had to turn off the hangar lights, but Murshida believed it was necessary. He was insistent on getting the *atmosphere* right. If everything looked right, it would work right, a philosophy that was utterly at odds with the Techno Union the Skakoans held sway in. Murshida had no love for the Techno Union.

"And don't forget, you need to make dinner soon," Esera called after him.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..." grumbled Voyan.

His cooking wasn't bad at all. Just... simple. And repetitive. Voyan was a creature of habit and did not like changing what he did. Esera was ready to start helping him, just to learn how to cook and switch up the menu a little. Since their talk a few days ago, Voyan had as cooperative as any subordinate ought to be. But despite agreeing to remain at his post, which he appeared to be completely genuine about, Esera felt a sense of festering frustration in Voyan, like a trapped animal. He was going to be a problem in the future, whether he knew it or not, unless Esera reached a better understanding with him.

"So, a new ship needs a new name," Esera said.

"So it does," Murshida agreed.

"Any suggestions?" asked Esera.

"Netherstorm," said Voyan, as he collected the candles. "Blade's Edge. Moonshadow."

"No." Esera rolled her eyes. "Something doesn't scream 'I'm looking for trouble,' that's what I want."

Murshida took his try: "Autumn Clouds. Shimmering Haze. Morning Frost."

"No, Mister Murshida," sighed Esera. "I don't want pretentious poet either."

The two men switched off with ideas, each one worse than the last, until they finally circled back to natural phenomena. "Flood," said Voyan.

"Whirlpool," said Murshida.

Voyan's eyes lit up, and the corner of his mouth ticked up, the closest thing to a smile there'd ever been on his face. "Whirlwind."

"Whirlwind!" Esera repeated, grinning. "Yes, that's it! Well done, lieutenant." The chief engineer gave her a tiny bow. "You hear that, *Scimitar*?Your name is now *Whirlwind*!"

"Not the most unique name in the galaxy," said Voyan, "but I'm glad you like it."

"Uniqueness is overrated," Murshida said. "Everything that can be done has been done already. All we can do is find a new way of interpreting and acting." Harak Murshida was a far easier person to deal with than Miha Voyan. The old Skakoan didn't seem to even have bad moods, he always looked for the best in everything.

As was becoming usual, Voyan cooked dinner in the ship's meager mess hall, while Murshida put his fruits and vegetables in a blender. Skakoans did not eat solid food and they did not eat meat, Esera learned. The two Humans got no end of amusement from watching Murshida noisily drink his green juice through a miniature pressurization chamber. R8 plugged into a charging port, and not wanting to be left out of the socializing, made his interjections of beeps and whistles in the conversation. Afterwards, Voyan delivered his daily report on *Encounter*'s status.

"...and after that, I finished work on the shield capacitors and power relays, this ship could be battle-ready in a pinch," he said.

"Good," said Esera. "Because we're going to Kashyyyk."

*Finally,* Voyan's expression seemed to say, but he used more professional words. "I am glad to hear that, Captain Komara. I was worried we'd miss the biggest battle fought since the days of the Sith Empire."

"Not a chance, working for Grievous," sighed Esera. "If we're going into battle, I might as well give you three official roles. Lieutenant, you're now chief engineer of *Encounter,* Mister Murshida, you'll serve as the ship's physician, R8, you'll help the lieutenant where needed, you're a lot more capable than the repair drones."

Murshida gave them a thumbs-up, still drinking his juice. R8 chirped and blinked his eye. Voyan leaned back in his seat, an unreadable look on his face. "When I was young, I used to dream about being the chief engineer of a starship. I'd given up on that a long time ago."

"You're not old, Lieutenant."

"I'm thirty, Captain. I wouldn't count myself as young."

"You're still not old, though," Esera repeated. "And you're welcome, by the way, for making your dream come true."

"Lieutenant Miha Voyan, one man engineering department..." said Voyan. "It's the kind of subversion I expect life to hand me, Captain. But it's something, and that's better than nothing."

"Get my ship ready for battle, Lieutenant. We leave as soon as possible."

Enforced recuperation left Obi-wan with plenty of time, and he liked to think he was using that time well. For the past few days, he had been digging deep into Marran Starship Storage, Incorporated's details. Officially, the company that had been taking care of Maul's ship was registered in Coruscant. It wasn't unusual for a Mid Rim trade nexus like Naboo to have Core-based company holdings, but what was unusual was the lack of company headquarters. All Obi-wan found was a mailing address. With permission from the Temple healers, he took a trip halfway across Coruscant to find it.

Coruscant had five thousand, one hundred and twenty seven levels, from the planet's bedrock to the top layer. There were countless buildings built on that layer, stretching higher into the sky, but that top layer was, for all intents and purposes, the real planet surface. Marran Starship Storage's mailing address was on level five thousand, one hundred, and two. It was close enough to the surface that there was still a fair amount of sunlight coming down through the access portals.

The address brought Obi-wan to a nondescript building, nothing more than a grey box among many other boxes. *At least it's clean up here,* thought Obi-wan, walking in through the front entrance. The building's lobby was as generic as could be, it had a few chairs around a table, a potted plant in the corner, and a security desk manned by one very bored Etti man watching a game of shockball on a tiny holotank. Surprise flashed across the Etti's blue face when he saw Obi-wan.

"Good afternoon," said Obi-wan.

"Good afternoon..?" The security guard clearly didn't know what to make of him. "Oh! All visitors are required to sign in, sir."

Obi-wan nodded. "You don't seem to get many."

"There's nothing to visit. But the rules are rules. Name?"

"Obi-wan Kenobi."

"Occupation?"

"Jedi."

The Etti's eyes narrowed. "Purpose of visit?"

"I'm looking into something. It's Jedi business."

"I see..." The guard opened up his computer terminal, and his eyes darted across it as he paged through something. Obi-wan could feel something in the Force, it wasn't urgent enough to be alarm, but the man was concerned. "What business would a Jedi have here?" he asked, trying but failing to keep his voice still.

"Something was stolen that entrusted to the care of Marran Starship Storage. Their mailing address is this building," Obi-wan said.

"I see, I see," said the Etti. His hands were trembling. "Unfortunately all that's here is a mailbox. Marran's headquarters are elsewhere. I don't know where."

Obi-wan raised an eyebrow, but went to look at the mailboxes in the hall behind the lobby. There was a bank of elevators as well, and a list of businesses in the building. *A corporate tax law firm, a fungus removal business, a pipe joint supplier...* Marran was not listed. All they had here was a mailbox, big enough to receive datapad packages, for when electronic transmission wasn't good enough for someone's paranoia.

He returned to the security guard. "What do you know?" Obi-wan asked.

The Etti was sweating, it only took a few moments of stern staring for him to crack. "I confess!" he cried. "It was me! My speeder broke last week, I needed fifty credits to fix it so I could keep getting to work! He's always sending thousands of credits a month to them, I figured no one would notice if two fifty went missing-"

Obi-wan sighed, and held up his hand. "That's not why I'm here," he said, before he picked up on what the Etti had said. "Who is sending credits?"

"Mister Greejatus, uh, sir Jedi."

"Do you have a full name?" asked Obi-wan.

"Janus Greejatus," said the Etti. "Credits come from him, they go to Marran. I don't ask questions."

*Now there's the lead I was looking for,* thought Obi-wan. "Thank you for you time," he said. "And the credits? That'll be our little secret."

The Etti slumped down in his seat, exhaling.

The long-awaited closing of Kashyyyk's encirclement came quietly, and went entirely unnoticed for a whole three hours. While Grievous and Oro Dassyne cut the Republic's army on the surface to pieces, Kronaak and the other admirals were engaged in a grueling running battle that had gone on for almost two weeks now. The Separatists were playing it safe, like the pirates they'd once fought in the Outer Rim, diving in with their superior fleet speeds and getting out before taking too much damage, baiting the Republic Star Destroyers into long chases and intense maneuvers to burn through their fuel and ammunition. Eemon's convoys kept arriving, but the Republic convoys were too few to keep up with the resources they were expending. If the Republic admiralty realized this, they weren't doing anything to rectify it. Or more likely, weren't being *allowed* to do anything to rectify it. They took their orders from the Senate, after all.

And when Torn Station went silent, and the tankers and freighters stopped arriving for the Republic, Grievous's true plan became horrifically clear to them. This wasn't a battle of attrition, this was a battle of encirclement, and they'd just become encircled. Admiral Hithlu's hologram appeared on *Aethra*'s bridge, a fleet-wide transmission.

"This is Hithlu, to all ships," he said, "Khwaramenes has taken Torn Station. The annihilation phase of the battle has begun. Press the attack with everything you have!"

"Commander, close the inner hangar doors, I don't want our prisoners getting spaced," Kronaak said.

"Roger, roger," said OOM-27. The droid tilted his head, then turned back to Kronaak. "Sir, we're getting contacts emerging out of hyperspace. It's Eemon's fleet, sir."

"At last! Get him on the line."

Rear Admiral Ricimer Eemon appeared via hologram, looking almost giddy. "Good evening, good morning, good whatever it is to you, my friend! I'm glad you've saved some for us, I was getting worried we'd miss everything."

"It's morning by *Aethra*'s clock, Eemon," said Kronaak. "There's plenty of Loyalist ships to go around, don't worry about being left out. Come, let us strike a blow against the Republic!"

"I'd say 'thus to all tyrants,' but knowing my father, I don't think he'd appreciate that..." Eemon shrugged. "Lead the way, Kronaak, I'll be right behind you."

"It's chaos up here, General," Admiral Hithlu's hologram said. "But leave it to us and we'll have it cleaned up in a few days. Once their reactors go offline, they'll scuttle their ships and it'll be over. Fifteen thousand Star Destroyers, all blown to pieces. That number is hardly comprehensible."

"Everything is going as planned, then," Grievous said, nodding. "The battle on the ground is nearly over as well, but there is still the city of Kachirho for me to conquer. I leave securing the orbits to you, Admiral."

"It will be done, General."

The Republic army was cut in two. The greater part had been destroyed in Grievous's operation in the forest, surrounded and blasted into oblivion from all sides. A smaller section had retreated back down the road to Kachirho, and now Grievous had chased them to the tree city itself.

"Looks like most of the clones are pulling back to their Star Destroyer," said Colonel Oro Dassyne, perched in the commander's hatch of an AAT. "Shall we pursue?"

"Hmm..." Grievous tapped the handles of his wheelbike. "No. They won't have anywhere to go, soon. We take the city, before they can destroy their hyperlane charts. Suppress their defensive line, I'm going in."

"Yes, sir," said Dassyne, pulling the hatch down closer over his head. "Open fire!"

The AATs, MTTs, GATs, and all manner of droid vehicles began pounding away at the clone and Wookiee defenses, foolishly put in trenches outside the city itself, instead of inside it where there was more cover. Grievous and his magnaguards, all on wheelbikes, rushed forward. "No stopping until we reach the navigation guild's chambers!" he announced. The magnaguards acknowledged.

The nine wheelbikes blazed past the bewildered clones and Wookiees, a hail of red laser fire right behind them. Kachirho had been stripped bare of troops, they were either retreating to the Star Destroyer or manning the defensive perimeter. The last thing anyone expected was for Grievous to just drive into the city with only his personal guard, apparently. *Or did they?* he wondered. Intelligence reported that Grand Master Yoda himself was present. Had the Jedi foreseen his arrival and cleared out the city to avoid unnecessary bloodshed? *Foolish!*

"Dassyne," Grievous said into his comlink. "Keep your eyes on this tree. There is a very important Jedi here. Do not let anything approach this location, or leave it, unless I give the signal."

"Understood, General," said Dassyne. "Shall I begin my assault?"

"Yes."

The droids would keep the Republic busy outside while Grievous either secured the charts of dealt with the Jedi. He and his guards entered the tallest wroshyr tree unopposed, and made their way to the navigator guild's chambers.

"Ah, victory," Grievous said, stepping into the cartography archive. His magnaguards fanned out behind him. Slowly, Grievous walked to the center of the chamber, where the sun's rays came through the window high on the wall. They were surrounded by stacks of data crystals in their containers, the treasure of Kashyyyk he'd first come here for. Then, he heard the breathing, so quiet his hearing had barely picked it up. Grievous whipped around, sabers out, but an invisible force pinned his magnaguards to the ground, and swept his feet out from under him. He was pushed down to the floor, until he was face to

face with a diminutive little creature.

"General Grievous, I presume?" asked he.

"Yoda," growled Grievous, struggling against the Force that was holding him down. "Release me, Jedi! Face me, warrior to warrior!"

"Warrior? Warrior I am not." Yoda shook his head, and sat down on small pile of holochart data crystal boxes. He poked Grievous's faceplate with his cane, between his eyes. "Why fight you, should I? So small I am, so large are you. Seems unfair, it does, yes?"

"Bah! As if your size matters when you have the Force." That remark seemed to amuse the little Jedi, which only made Grievous angrier. "If you will not fight me, you should kill me!" Grievous said.

"Yes, prudent it would be, to kill you," agreed Yoda, nodding along, wrinkled brow furrowing. "Destroy a dangerous enemy, I would."

"But you hesitate. You have frozen me here, unable to move, but you will not release me, and you will not kill me! Coward!" Grievous would have spat if he could. "Do not hold the delusion that you can capture me! My own people would kill me before they allowed me to be captured. I have ordered them to already! As we speak, my forces are-"

Yoda hit him between the eyes with his cane again. "Quiet," he said, "thinking am I." Grievous tried to speak, and his vocoder diagnostic reported everything was functioning, but no sound was coming out. He was left to seethe in silence at the Jedi Master. "Know you, who Darth Sidious was?" Yoda asked, after a length.

"Of course I knew him," Grievous said. "I spoke to that wretched man every week. Sidious controlled your entire government, you blind fool! None of you Jedi could see it."

"Controlled?" Yoda turned to him, raising an eyebrow. "Controlled, say you? Happened, something has?"

Grievous laughed, a dark mirth bubbling up from deep within him. "Wouldn't you like to know? I will say nothing more. Kill me now, and be done with it."

"No, kill you now I will not. Make a deal we shall, like your deal with young Luminara," Yoda said. "Tell me the answers I seek, and have your duel, you will."

*I can't win,* Grievous thought. *No surprise, no fear, no backup. I'm finished if I fight him!* But another part of him didn't care about that. Something deeper, something young and reckless stirred in his heart. Was there any death more glorious than battling against the leader of the abominable Jedi Order? "We have a deal," Grievous said.

"What know you of the fate of Sidious?" asked Yoda.

"I have not heard from Sidious since I captured Palpatine," said Grievous. "It has been nearly four months now. I believe him to be dead."

"Controlled the Republic, you say?"

"Yes, right under your ignorant Jedi noses!" Grievous laughed again. "He was there, the whole time, pulling the strings of your precious Senate, prolonging the war at every turn, foiling every attempt at peace the mewling civilians cried for!"

Yoda looked deeply troubled. "Know you this, how?"

"I have Dooku's holocrons. He was a meticulous note-keeper."

"Yes, yes he was..." There was sadness in the little green alien's voice. "Only one sensitive to the Force can open a holocron. Have you a Dark Jedi, assisting you?"

"Presumptuous fool!" Grievous roared. "The duplicity of the dark siders has ruined my plans again and again! I would kill every last one of those neurotic, self-serving, short-sighted imbeciles if you Jedi weren't the ones who destroyed my world!"

"Destroyed your world, did we?" Yoda looked genuinely curious now, and that only made Grievous's fury blaze hotter.

"You say it like you have no idea what happened! You're the executors of your Chancellor's will! You're the one who sent Jedi to Kalee, to punish us for defending our homes and our families from slavers and murderers!" Grievous struggled against the Force holding him in place, like a chained beast. "I swore to every god and every ancestor I would make you pay for what you did. I swore on the graves of my father, my mother, my wives, and my children. I swore by the life of every one of my people who died at your hands, and under your sanctions. Not until your Order is destroyed, will I rest! Never!" His own outburst caught him by surprise. Grievous knew he'd been a father, but only now did he remember many of those children had died young. The burning hatred he felt for the Jedi came into focus even more.

Yoda sat, staring at him with pity. "Such rage, such pain. You walk a grim path. Your heart is closed. Speak with you not on this subject will I. Tell me, Grievous, if hate you the dark siders so much, why work with one?"

"I work with no such cretin," said Grievous with all the venom he could muster.

"What of Komara?"

For a few moments, Grievous stared at the little Jedi Master. "Esera Komara, a dark sider? *Esera Komara?* That sentimental girl who got sad over shooting one Nemoidian? Who can't even speak of her beloved Master Callo without falling to pieces?" Grievous shook his head, giving Yoda a disgusted glare. "You're more delusional than I thought. Are you really so ignorant of your own pawns?"

"Reported, Jedi have, that they sensed the dark side in her."

"A momentary lapse," said Grievous. "I will suffer no dark siders in my presence."

"So certain, are you?" Yoda tilted his head. "Hate you the Jedi, yet employ one in your service, you do."

"That child has more conviction than your entire temple put together," Grievous said. "How is it that a seventeen year old girl managed to see you all for what you were, when you couldn't even find the Sith lord under your noses? Pathetic." Finally, Grievous's words had a visible effect on Yoda: a dark, troubled look came over his face. *I need to keep going,* Grievous thought. "What story did Holt and Aspar tell you?" asked Grievous, remembering Komara's rant during their first meeting. "Did they mention how they conspired to execute hundreds of thousands of your precious civilians? Did you not see this was why she did what she did? No? You were lied to, and you didn't even know it! Komara is no dark Jedi. She will never be a dark Jedi. Of all of you, only her eyes are open. And she came to us, when they were. Think about that, *Master* Yoda. The only one among you with any morality and sense came to serve *me*."

Another stretch of silence went on between the two of them. "Remember, young Komara, I do," Yoda said at last. "Weak in the Force, she was. Not ready for knighthood, she was. In her heart, uncertainty, doubt, and fear, there was. The dark side calls to those like her. The frightened, the weak, the dark side preys on them. Easy to believe it was, that she had fallen. Easy to blame. Too easy. The dark side clouds everything..."

"I see just fine," Grievous said. "Sidious is gone. Dooku is gone. Or is Maul the one clouding your vision now?"

"Why fight?" Yoda asked. "Gone are the Sith, if what you say is true. Captured or reformed their servants are. Only you remain."

"I am no one's servant!" yelled Grievous. "I will fight you to the bitter end, Jedi. I do not want peace so long as your Order exists! And I will destroy the Republic to destroy you, if I have to."

The invisible force vanished, and Grievous fell to the floor. He scrambled upright and took up a fighting stance, shaking off his cape. "Then kill you, I must," said Yoda.

"Finally, we understand each other!" Grievous said, with mocking warmth.

Yoda did not draw his lightsaber. He simply closed his eyes, and held out his hand, and sent Grievous flying into the wall of the chamber. Up and down, Grievous was tossed, smashing into every side of the chamber he was, before being dumped on the floor again. He was dazed from the assault, his head was spinning even as his combat software tried to compensate for the disorientation his organic senses experienced. Grievous stumbled to his feet, crouched over to keep his center of gravity low, talons digging into the wood floor.

"Against the power of the Force, win, you cannot," Yoda said.

"Victory or martyrdom, Jedi scum," growled Grievous, activating his lightsabers. A signal suddenly popped into his consciousness, transmitted into his brain from his computer components. Martrydom may not have been necessary, after all...

"Captain, we will be arriving in the Kashyyyk system imminently," the pilot droid reported.

"Very good," said Esera. "Voyan, status."

"All systems green, or at least as close to green as they'll get," Voyan said from the engineer's console. On a Republic Star Destroyer, the chief engineer would have been down in the reactor control room. On a *Recusant*-class destroyer, though, the reactor was entirely automated. The chief engineer just kept an eye on things from the bridge. Murshida stood by, out of the way, in case a medical emergency arose for the two Humans under his care.

"May the Force be with us," Esera muttered, as *Encounter* reverted to real-space.

As the ship shot out of the hyperspace tunnel, the planet of Kashyyyk rushing into view, multiple alerts went off on the bridge. Goosebumps rose on Esera's skin as she remembered the cacophony of alarms when the relativistic shield had partially failed in orbit of the black hole.

"Bloody hell," swore Esera, watching the tactical display light up with red and blue dots. Battles were raging in every orbit, the system was filled with them to such a degree that they all melded together into purple blobs above the planets. "That's a lot of ships!"

"Tens of thousands, Captain Komara," Voyan said. "Reminds me of Coruscant, just... across the whole system."

"Stunning," said Murshida, looking out the windows. "But tragic. How many lives will be thrown away here?"

"Too many," Esera said.

"We all knew what we were getting into," said Voyan. "The clones were bred to die, and the Republic's officers are volunteers, just like us. We agreed to be here. And unlike them, our cause is just."

"So it is," said Esera. That didn't mean she had to like any of this. "Pilot, keep us away from the fighting. Commander," Esera turned to the yellow-marked OOM battle droid, "see if you can attach us to one of the friendly formations. We're here on Grievous's direct authority."

"Roger, roger," said the droid.

"And Voyan, you have command."

Voyan twisted his head around, giving her a stare. "Me?"

"I trust you will make better decisions than the battle droid," said Esera. She stood up, and beckoned the lieutenant over. "Sit, be smart. I'm taking *Scimitar*- I mean, *Whirlwind,* to the surface. Mister Murshida, with me."

"Always on the move," sighed Voyan, taking the captain's chair.

Esera was expecting a message from the cyborg any moment, now. What was strange was that he hadn't contacted her as soon as she'd entered the system. *He's in trouble, I bet,* thought Esera. The Skakoan followed silently, the haft of his vibro-ax tapping the deck with each of his steps.

"Things might get hectic down there," Esera said, once they were aboard *Whirlwind.* "It might be better if you stay in here while I see what Grievous is up to."

"Captain Komara, I have trained for battle since I was fifteen," said Murshida. "I will fight at your side, if I must."

"Alright," Esera said.

*Whirlwind* launched out of the hangar, Esera activated the cloak instantly. The ship was different now, she was sure of it. All the anger and fury she'd felt inside was gone. Now, *Whirlwind* was serene on the surface, but there was an energy in her. A power waiting calmly to be released. Unlike *Scimitar*, *Whirlwind* wasn't begging to be unleashed, howling for blood and glory. She was still, tranquil, disciplined; whatever was inside her was locked safely away until the moment it was needed. *Almost like a Jedi,* Esera thought.

"To get down to Kashyyyk we're going to have to fly through fighting," said Esera. "Strap in, Mister Murshida."

"This is my first space battle," the Skakoan said, bucking his restraints and then tying down his vibro-ax.

"I'll try not to get us shot up too bad," said Esera. "But flying isn't my strength."

*Whirlwind* hurtled towards the Republic battle lines. Esera had seen holovids from Coruscant, that battle had been fought at point blank range, quite literally. The battle of Coruscant had the highest rate of ramming per capita of any battle in the war. Here, though, the Separatists were keeping their distance, and both sides fought in clear formations at range, instead of the chaotic melee that had gone down over the Republic's capital months ago. The Separatist frigates and destroyers just didn't have the durability for those kinds of battles.

To get to Kashyyyk, Esera had to fly through the firing solutions of both Confederate and Republic fleets. The red lasers from the Separatist line were much more dangerous than the blue lasers flying past *Whirlwind*, Esera had no visual warning if she was about to be blasted out of orbit, only a premonition in the Force a fraction of a second before. *Whirlwind* swerved and spun and she dodged, until Esera found a flight of ARC-170s to follow back to their ship. They were on the Republic fighters so closely that Esera could see the face of the tail gunner through his windscreen.

Murshida knew better than to break Esera's focus by speaking, but she could feel the Skakoan's curiosity at how she preemptively avoiding anything that was threat. This was an aspect of the Force he had never discovered. *Whirlwind* flew straight past the guns of a dozen Star Destroyers, skirting so close to the hull of one that Esera caught glimpses figures in the windows. Any closer and they'd be bouncing off the ship's shields.

And then, they were through. Esera let out a long breath, and wiped the sweat on her brow. "I've never done that before," she said.

"And no one was even aiming at us," Murshida noted.

Before either could say more, *Whirlwind* received a message from *Encounter*. "Captain," Voyan's voice said. "We're getting a transmission from the surface. Text only, directed to you."

"Put it through, lieutenant."

*Komara, come to the main tree, Kachirho city! Keep ship cloaked.*

"That's Grievous alright," said Esera. "I knew he was in trouble."

"I am eager to meet this Grievous. A most unusual name, I must say."

"The name's the least unusual thing about him," Esera said. *Whirlwind* hit the atmosphere, the whole ship shaking and jolting as it forced its way through particles that hadn't been there a moment ago. To an outside observer, they would have seen a ball of fire surrounding nothing at all. But space was big, and from hundreds of kilometers away they were just another piece of debris deorbiting. Kachirho city was not a spaceport, though the ship's computer knew where it was. Off-worlders often went to Kachirho to do business with the Wookiees. Esera regretted that war had come to Kashyyyk, the Wookiees had managed to stay out of the conflict for three years. Now their homes were burning and their people dying. All for the sake of Grievous's plan, whatever it was.

*We're here,* Esera messaged the cyborg. If he could send text messages, he could surely receive them too. There was a risk of someone tracking their transmission to a patch of seemingly empty air a few thousand meters above Kachirho, but by the time they'd triangulated the location of the transmission *Whirlwind* would be kilometers away. Anyone checking out air currents and pressure would instantly realized a cloaked ship was about, though. At the Temple, the Jedi trained to deal with cloaking devices; they were far harder to detect in space than in atmosphere.

*Fire on my location!*

"Whatever you say, Grievous," Esera said, dropping the cloak and shooting the trunk of the tree where Grievous's transponder was active.

"I am detecting two lifeforms in there," said Murshida, peering at burning hole *Whirlwind* had blasted in the tree.

"I hope he's got more of a plan than that, this tree is the only thing between us and the Star Destroyer parked on the other side of the city!"

"Is he fighting someone?" Murshida's head touched the viewport as he tried to get a better look. The huge Skakoan's armored bulk almost pushed Esera from the pilot's seat. Flashes of light came from within, and Esera felt an immensely strong presence in the Force.

"I sense someone familiar," Esera said. "I don't know who. Not someone I knew well, from the Temple. Familiar all the same... Let's go, Mister Murshida." *Whirlwind* turned about and dropped the ramp, Esera and Murshida made the jump into the tree, weapons ready. Esera thought she was ready to take on any Jedi, with Grievous and Murshida at her side. She thought she was done with the Order. She thought her loyalty to her new cause was unshakable.

But her heart froze when she saw the tiny green form of Master Yoda, locked in battle with Grievous. Her old leader against her new.

Grievous's eyes darted to the new arrivals. "How quickly the tide turns," he said, a low rumbling laugh escaping his lungs. "Komara, keep him from crushing me with the Force, leave the sword work to me! Your friend can help with that too!"

Murshida jumped into the fray without another thought, vibro-ax growling; he had no idea who he was going up against. Esera just stood in place, as every rational part of her mind screaming at her to run, run and don't look back. Nobody could defeat Master Yoda, nobody!

"Jedi Komara!" Yoda called, panting from his exertion against the cyborg. "Need you not be a pawn! Help subdue this criminal, you must, and uncover the truth we will!"

Esera held her lightsaber with shaking hands. "I am no one's pawn! Not yours, not his!" she said.

"You heard the woman, Yoda," Grievous said, his blades clashing against Yoda's at speeds so fast Esera could barely make them out. "It's like I said, she sees you for what you are!"

"And see you not what Grievous is?" asked Yoda, jumping up onto a shelf of data crystals before shooting down towards Grievous again, lightsaber seeking an opening in the whirling lights Grievous kept moving around him. "Be not tricked, young one! Listen to me, you must!" Yoda began, but Esera did something she'd once never even dared to dream:

"No! I won't!" *I just talked back to Master Yoda,* thought Esera, an overwhelming feeling somewhere between dread and supreme confidence taking hold of her. "You started this war, with your slave army and greed for power! Why would I *ever* listen to someone like you, who's betrayed the very idea of being a Jedi!?"

Whatever response Yoda might have had to that, he didn't have breath to waste on words. Sufficiently hyped up by her own words, Esera reached out a hand as she reached out her will, and tried to throw Yoda back away from Grievous. Such an attack on the Grand Master of the Jedi Order was futile, but that momentary break in concentration was all Grievous needed to take the initiative. He began herding Yoda towards the hole in the wall, while Murshida circled around and took jabs of opportunity, which never found their mark but kept the Jedi Master on his toes.

Yoda glanced at the ramp of *Whirlwind,* still stretched out. *Oh no you don't,* Esera thought. She tugged on Yoda's legs just as he jumped, holding him in air for just the single moment Grievous needed swat him down. "I have you now!" Grievous cackled, two and a half meters of angry metal looming over the tiny Jedi. But Yoda unleashed a wave of Force energy, pinning Grievous to the ceiling and sending him into the kind of coughing fit Esera hadn't heard in months.

The Skakoan Cyber Guard rose to take Grievous's place in the battle, sweeping down his vibro-ax at the Jedi. Against an entirely living being with no malicious will or dark side presence, Yoda faltered. The two stared each other down for moment frozen in time, locked in a mental battle only they could feel, until the spell broke as Grievous crashed to the floor, landing on all six limbs. Yoda swung his saber, meaning to split the vibro-ax in two, but his blade stopped against the haft, and shorted out. That instant of surprise was all Murshida needed to break Yoda's focus. The Skakoan swung the vibro-ax down again, and Yoda jumped out of the way, straight into the armored boot arcing out to meet him. The Jedi Master went flying out of the tree.

Grievous, on his feet, scrambled to the hole in the trunk, heedless of the still-smoking charred wood, and stared down. Esera joined him, watching the tiny green dot that was Yoda land on his feet and bounce away out of sight, out of the fight and very much still alive. Grievous turned to Murshida. "You... you *punted* that little creature!" he said, skin around his eyes crinkling in delight.

"Yes, I did," Murshida said, green-glowing goggles flashing from beneath his cowl. "I have spent fifty-seven years practicing that move. I am grateful to have lived to use it... though I did not expect it to be so effective."

Grievous laughed. He laughed until he keeled over coughing. Never had Esera heard such genuine mirth from Grievous. "Who are you, Skakoan?" he asked, after recovering his breath.

"Harak Murshida, formerly of the Skako Cyber Guard, formerly a hermit and healer, now ship's physician aboard Captain Komara's *Encounter*." Murshida gave a polite bow to Grievous. "I have heard much about you from my employer, General."

"Hah! I'm sure you have." Grievous looked over at Esera. "Well done, Komara. You have a knack for finding useful allies."

Once more, a knife plunged into Esera's heart as she heard her master's words from long ago. *You've got a talent for finding friends, Esera,* Master Callo had said, before the war. She'd doubted those words, then. Esera turned away from the others, taking a moment to compose herself. "The truth is, Grievous, I'm a team player."

"So it would seem..." Grievous took back up his cloak, and checked on the ground battle. The last defensive lines around the city had broken, the droids were flooding in. Behind them, the Star Destroyer blasted off from the surface, engines roaring as it soared over the wroshyr trees. *I'm surprised they didn't glass us,* thought Esera.

"Did you know that Jedi?" Murshida asked.

"Yes," Esera said. "That was Grand Master Yoda you kicked out of the tree. I can't believe you did that!"

The Skakoan shrugged. "We were trained to fight Jedi in that way. We act on instinct, below the conscious level. They can't predict what we're not thinking. I can hardly believe I did that either."

"The Jedi haven't fought a war in a thousand years, before this. All my master and I fought were criminals, if they even had the guts to go up against us. After that, it was droids and the occasional poorly-trained militia." Esera shook her head, and exhaled. "It's a strange feeling, to see someone you thought was invincible get beaten like that. Jedi can go down like anyone else."

"It's a big galaxy, Captain Komara," said Murshida. "You never know what's got your name on it."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's a blaster bolt, maybe it's a knife blade, maybe it's a bacteria, maybe it's an organ failure. In a hundred seconds or in a hundred years. Something out there's got your name on it, and it's coming for you." Murshida leaned against his vibro-ax, looking out over Kashyyyk. "Do you ever think about that?"

"I... I don't think so. But no one lives forever," said Esera.

"No one does," agreed Murshida. "My boot did not have Master Yoda's name on it. Not this time, at least. And perhaps not any other time. I felt a powerful presence in him."

"He's only the strongest Jedi alive, you know."

The Skakoan stood still, before nodding. "I think we were lucky. He wasn't expecting you, and your words shook him. My cortosis weave wouldn't have caught him so off guard without you here."

"Yeah..." Esera frowned. She found herself wishing she could have explained things better to Master Yoda. He'd always seemed so patient and understanding, at the Temple... how could that same master be the one who began this war? *This is all so wrong,* she thought. *But here I am. Nothing will change what's done.*

Minutes later, Grievous's good mood evaporated as he discovered all the data crystals in the chamber were fakes. The Wookiees had gotten the last laugh.

"I won't sugarcoat this, Chancellor, it's all gone to hell," Governor Therbon reported, his hologram transmission laced with static as it bounced a circuitous route through Hutt Space transceivers to Coruscant. "They came out of nowhere at Torn Station, they shut the gate right behind us. We needed to break out *yesterday*." The Governor looked exhausted, his forces had been fighting in the Kashyyyk system for two weeks strait.

"I warned you all," Tarkin muttered, but only Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence heard, who closed his eyes and covered his face with a hand.

"What can we do?" asked Mas Amedda.

"*What can we do?*" Admiral Salima repeated. Her face would have been purple with rage if her skin hadn't already been so naturally dark. "My lord, we should have moved in Praji days ago! The Fourth Fleet is sitting at Umbara, doing nothing!"

Governor Praji's hologram gave Salima an annoyed look. "My fleet is sitting at Umbara because that damned Separatist battleship you can't catch destroyed our fuel convoy! We are *stuck* here!"

"You think you're having fuel problems?" asked Therbon. "I've got less than forty-eight hours until every last one of my ships' reactors go offline!"

"What about the reinforcements from Hutt Space?" asked Mace Windu.

"I ordered them to abort their breakthrough attempt," Therbon said. "If they got into the Kashyyyk system then we'd have even more ships for what little supplies we have left. They're more useful tying up a few hundred enemy vessels at Randon."

"Is it true we've lost the ground battle?" asked the Togruta whose name escaped Tarkin. "Did Master Yoda make it off the surface?"

"Hell if I know," sighed Therbon. "I've got so much crap flying around this system that I don't even know where half my own ships are right now. My crew are passing out at their posts. I see now why the Separatists use droids. A system-wide battle of this length is unprecedented. My people were not trained for operations like this. And our supply lines certainly weren't prepared!"

"You may blame that on the late Chancellor Palpatine," Tarkin said. "He's the one who canceled orders for more escort craft."

"Thank you, Senator Tarkin," Therbon said, giving him an icy glare. "That is so *very* helpful."

Tarkin gave him an equally cold smirk in turn.

"Enough bickering!" Salima shouted, slamming her fist on the holotable, causing the tactical projection to flicker. "I'll fill the Home Fleet's tanks to the brim and smash through Torn Station myself, if that'll get you the fuel you need, Governor."

"No, we can't leave the Core defenseless," Amedda said. The military men and women collectively groaned, and even the Jedi looked weary with the Chancellor.

"The most powerful fleet ever built... and we can't even use it because someone didn't want to spend money on convoy escorts," Director Orlok muttered.

"What happens if we can't get fuel to the fleet at Kashyyyk?" asked the Togruta Jedi, worry on her face.

"Then we're finished," Therbon said. "Unless *someone* wants to open a route out of the system for us. The Wookiees refused to hand over their charts."

"Admiral Salima," Mas Amedda said. "Load half the Home Fleet's fuel into our remaining tankers, get them to Umbara and fuel up Praji's fleet."

"Yes, my lord," said Salima, bowing curtly and rushing out of the room.

*Finally, you're taking initiative,* thought Tarkin. *But I fear it's too late...*

That night, Tarkin got in touch with an acquaintance. A Carammite exile. They didn't know each other's names, nor even each other's faces. Tarkin just so happened to leave a data card in a package, under a bench not in sight of any camera. When he looked back, from a block away, a figure walking by picked up the package and kept on walking without another glance. One way or another, Captain Hatha of the Separatist super-battleship *Cataclysm* was going to find out about this convoy heading to Umbara. *It's all for the greater good,* Tarkin thought. *Things need to get worse before they can get better.*

**Author's note:** Happy New Year folks, may 2020 be less god-awful than 2019 was. Well, it wasn't all bad, but my plans got derailed by bureaucrats and a long-delayed life goal has been put off another year. I really hate bureaucrats. Anyways, this was supposed to be up before the new year, but IRL obligations always come first. We've got one more chapter coming up in this arc, stay tuned.

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